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## **The refugee challenge calls for exceptional urgent measures**

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## THE REFUGEE CHALLENGE CALLS FOR EXCEPTIONAL URGENT MEASURES

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By Mirjam van Reisen\* | IDN-InDepthNews Viewpoint



BRUSSELS (IDN) - With the 28-nation EU desperately trying to find a solution to the unprecedented inflow of people seeking international protection and a better life, the size of the problem and the political battlefield are seriously damaging European cooperation and undermining citizens' trust in the European project.

However, the proposals presented by the European Commission six months ago were reasonable and fair. Strengthening EU's diplomacy to resolve the Syrian conflict, stepping up assistance to the countries neighbouring Syria, reinforcing external border controls and relocating 40,000 refugees based on a fair distribution key – all these made complete sense and could have been an adequate answer to the situation, *at that point in time*.

But Member States didn't play ball. The shameful lack of solidarity, pure selfishness and political short sightedness of a number of (especially new) Member States frustrated any attempt to manage the situation in a reasonable and serene way. Despite all the (European) Councils, precious

time has been lost and the situation today is worse than ever before, threatening to hurt the very fundamentals of the EU.

Therefore it's high time we did a reality check.

Here are the facts: No one believes that 160,000 people will actually be relocated or that a Hotspot approach will work; Member States are not coming up with the financial contributions badly needed to support EU efforts; the Syria crisis has escalated with a serious risk of producing additional refugee flows – and please do not be so naïve as to expect that refugees would stay put in Turkey or in the Western Balkans.

Given the perilous situation, additional measures on top of what the Commission already proposed are urgently needed. Here are the main ones:

- 1. First priority: bring flows under control.** In order to take away fears of things spinning out of control, external border controls need to be reinforced. An area of free movement cannot exist without checks at the entrance. Waiting for the new legislation to put in place a European border and coast guard would however be a terrible mistake. The EU should send a sizable contingent of border control experts to the EU's external borders as soon as possible; anyone who believes Greece can deal with external borders on its own is dreaming.
- 2. Second priority: monitor internal flows.** This implies that all refugees that move inside the Schengen zone – comprising 26 European countries that have abolished passport and any other type of border control at their common borders – should be registered, screened and finger printed in a standardized manner. This can be done at internal borders or in the reception centres. Registration needs to be done on the basis of a European template, that also includes information on professional qualifications, education and skills.
- 3. Drop the idea that all can go to Germany and refine the relocation system.** Sweden and Germany will be part of the relocation system but in a way that other Member States will come to assist these two countries that have already taken 90% of the refugees. 'Secondary relocation' from Germany to other EU (new) Member States needs to start and should be acceptable to all countries, including Hungary, as registration has already been taken care of and one can take preferences into account.

- 4. Call for an international conference on resettlement** also involving the United States, Canada, Israel,

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Australia and the Arab states.

5. **Design the 'Europe Hosting program'.** Receiving and integrating refugees will be about three things: providing housing, access to the labour market and offering education. A European effort is needed in all these areas in close cooperation with the Member States, regional and local authorities and the business sector.

The Commission should propose the launch of a **Europe Builds program** that will see the construction of 200,000 houses in the next three years. Such an initiative will provide accommodation to about 50,000 refugees, will allow to offer housing to many citizens waiting for appropriate housing for years and will give a serious impulse to the European housing and construction sector, creating about 30.000 new jobs. Refugees often bring skills and are ready to work. They should be allowed to take on jobs that have remained vacant for six months, three months after they have handed in their asylum request.

6. **Ensure proper protection standards in the countries neighbouring Syria** with a 5 billion euro assistance budget. Money needs to come in fast to ensure sufficient food, accommodation, health services and education to refugees in the region. Instead of calling on Member States to add to the one billion euros already allocated by the Commission, the entire funding needs to come from the EU budget to ensure money reaches organizations in time.

7. **Create temporary financial space.** The funding of the measures indicated will require an increase in the financial allocations. This can be done rapidly by asking a pro rata contribution from all member States to the EU budget. If so required Member States would get some flexibility and would be allowed a temporary 3.5% budget deficit to GDP for the next three years.

With the Syrian crisis far from over, the EU needs to take additional measures urgently. The European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker is right: "We need more Europe." With the measures proposed here, Europe could be moving toward the day that we will be able to say 'Wir haben es geschafft' – 'We've made it'.

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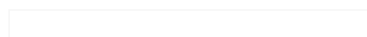
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